

RISE OF FASCISM IN EUROPE

Subject: [Patrin] Firebrand exposes the 2 faces of France

Date: Fri, 10 May 2002 19:47:53 -0500

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May 2, 2002

Firebrand exposes the 2 faces of France

Isahel Vincent, National Post

LASSERRE, France - In this picturesque village in France's lush southwest, Marcel Demblans worries about what he calls "the Muslim problem."

It's not that any Muslims actually live in Lasserre, a village of 600 people about 25 kilometres outside Toulouse, France's fourth largest city. But in the last year there has been a wave of violent burglaries and carjackings, which included an attack on the mayor's office and the looting of the local supermarket, and Mr. Demblans is convinced that immigrants, particularly those from North African countries, are to blame.

"They come here and they rob us easily because unlike people in the city, we have little police protection here in the country," said Mr. Demblans, who is 44 and a prominent landowner in this prosperous region, where many residents work in the aerospace industry.

Although he admits he has no proof outsiders are to blame for any crimes here, he is not alone in the village in holding that belief.

"I've lived here my whole life, and we've never had so much as a robbery before last year," he said. "Now things are truly out of control."

Which is why on Sunday, when French voters go to the polls to elect a new president, Mr. Demblans and his twin brother, Denis, will vote for the far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen, pictured at left, who stunned the country last month when he won nearly 17% of the vote in the first round of elections, edging out Lionel Jospin, the Socialist Prime Minister.

Mr. Le Pen, the leader of the National Front party, has campaigned largely on a tough anti-crime platform, and in the past has promised to send illegal immigrants home. His critics say he is playing on the fears of such people as the Demblans, whipping up racism and xenophobia and linking newly arrived asylum seekers -- most of them from Muslim countries -- to rising rates of crime throughout France.

Although it is impossible to prove which groups -- if any -- are responsible for the rise in crime, because it is illegal in France to break down crime statistics by race, Mr. Le Pen and his supporters clearly link immigrants with what they call insecurity.

The far-rightist leader, who has been charged several times in France with inciting racism and anti-Semitism, faces Jacques Chirac, the incumbent President, in Sunday's second round of voting. Although polls say Mr. Chirac will win by a landslide, the French and their neighbours in Western Europe will be keenly anticipating the outcome.

This is because the issues Mr. Le Pen has raised -- immigration, crime and the future of the European Union, among others -- are now being hotly debated throughout the region, as ultra-right-wing groups gain prominence by exploiting latent xenophobia and racism in the wake of an increase in mostly Muslim asylum seekers and recent tensions in the Middle East.

Although most French people express dismay at the first-round election results, with hundreds of thousands joining street protests in recent days, the Demblans brothers believe Mr. Le Pen might well deliver a second surprise.

"The support for Le Pen runs deep in France," said Denis Demblans, adding that most of his friends -- all business owners in the region -- refuse to admit openly they support the National Front because of the stigma attached.

Although Marcel admits Mr. Le Pen has said some regrettable things in the past against Jews, he is the only presidential candidate willing to address what many in the village see as a crisis gripping France, and which is spreading across Europe.

"Here and all over Europe we are experiencing a profound collision of cultures," Mr. Demblans said.

"The Muslims come to our countries and they threaten our way of life. They have no respect for us. We are living in profound insecurity, and we're not going to put up with this any more."

Vanessa Buse agrees. "It used to be that as a woman alone you could walk through the streets at any time of day or night," said the 27-year-old restaurant manager and Le Pen supporter who lives in Toulouse. "Now I won't go into the centre of the city after 11 p.m."

Seventy-four per cent of those who voted for Mr. Le Pen in the first round cited insecurity as the main reason, according to several French election polls.

Police statistics show the number of violent crimes in France rose from fewer than 100,000 in 1994 to more than 400,000 last year. In the suburbs of major urban centres, where new immigrants live in high-rise housing projects built during the 1960s that are controlled by gangs, police refuse to make arrests without SWAT teams.

This week, Toulouse police officers were attacked by gangs of marauding youths when they entered La Reynerie, a crime-ridden suburb that is home to the majority of North African asylum seekers in the city.

"We have to deal with the immigrant problem," Mr. Demblans insisted. "During the French Revolution, we invented the rights of man. Now the revolution has come back to haunt us."

Those sentiments are echoed throughout Europe, where North African immigrants are routinely blamed for violent crime, and Russians and Albanians are blamed for controlling prostitution and the drug trade. Last year, a survey by the Vienna-based European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia found 20% of Europeans were "disturbed" by the presence of minorities. Every year, about 500,000 asylum seekers arrive illegally in Europe.

Despite the problems, the EU has yet to formalize any kind of universal policy to deal with integrating asylum seekers into their new societies.

In France alone there are about 400,000 illegal immigrants. Last year, the

country received applications from about 47,000 asylum seekers, mostly from China and Turkey. Most are forced to live on welfare and other government handouts while they wait for their applications for asylum to be processed. The process can take years, fuelling the perception immigrants are unfairly living off the public purse.

"They receive everything when they arrive here, but the rest of us pay through the nose in taxes," said Jean-Marc Rumeau, an entrepreneur in Toulouse. Mr. Rumeau said he will vote for Mr. Le Pen on Sunday because he has promised to ease the tax burden and streamline social services.

Throughout Western Europe, the immigrant question provides political fodder for a steadily advancing cadre of far-right politicians. While it is not exactly Germany in the early 1930s, where Adolf Hitler swept to power largely by blaming immigrants and Jews for the country's economic and social problems, analysts say there is cause for concern as extremists emerge to capitalize on a wave of insecurity.

Indeed, the advance of Mr. Le Pen in France has returned immigration to the forefront of political debate in Denmark, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Britain.

In Britain, both Labour and Conservative politicians worry that Mr. Le Pen's strong showing could boost the prospects of the British Nationalist Party, which had been largely relegated to the political fringes. In other European countries, ultra-right-wing politicians have made important political inroads in recent weeks.

In the Netherlands, extremist candidate Pim Fortuyn stunned the country in March by winning 36% of the vote in municipal elections in Rotterdam, where immigrants make up 40% of the population. He was campaigning on a platform that blamed crime on gangs from Morocco, Turkey and the Dutch Antilles.

Mr. Fortuyn, a gay former Marxist, also called Muslims backward for their treatment of gays and women. In a poll conducted by Nieuwe Revu magazine, nearly half of Dutch youth said they want to end Muslim immigration.

In poorer countries outside the EU, minorities are also blamed for the bulk of crimes.

In Romania, right-wing politician Coroeliu Vadim Tudor won 28% of the vote in the presidential race two years ago. He said gypsies were responsible for most of his country's problems and offered to rule the country with a machine and to "cure gypsy criminality with small cells and long whips."

In Western Europe, the perception that Muslim immigrants are the cause of rising crime was given a huge boost by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, especially in such countries as Germany, which had unwittingly harboured some of the al-Qaeda terrorists who took part in the hijackings.

Three of the suicide pilots had lived in Hamburg, where, a few weeks after the attacks, the anti-immigrant party of Ronald Schill gained nearly 20% of the vote in a city election. Last month, the party attracted less than 5% in regional elections in Saxony-Anhalt.

Back in Toulouse, the rise of right-wing parties throughout Western Europe worries Charles Touati, a Moroccan-born Jew.

"I am very upset at the emerging configuration in Europe," he said. "There is no longer a European country that does not have an extreme right-wing party."

Although he said he would never vote for Mr. Le Pen, whom he views as a racist and an anti-Semite, Mr. Touati admits he is worried about the influx

of Muslim refugees, whom he blames for several recent attacks on synagogues and Jewish centres.

Days after Israeli troops launched their counterterrorism campaign in the West Bank, there were 400 anti-Semitic incidents in France, many of them brutal attacks on synagogues. Police blamed Muslim, North African youths.

"Now you see that what is happening in Israel is also happening here," said Marcel Demblans, who voted for Mr. Chirac in the last presidential vote but now criticizes him for supporting the Palestinian cause instead of rallying firmly behind Israel.

Mr. Touati agrees, but said he will be voting for Mr. Chirac anyway on Sunday. He admitted he is afraid of Mr. Le Pen, who on several occasions has called the Holocaust "a detail of history."

"I am voting for Chirac, but with little enthusiasm," he said. "Le Pen is a bigger menace. We have to stop the scourge of the right."

Meanwhile in Lasserre, Mr. Demblans recently hosted a dinner of some of Mr. Le Pen's strongest and wealthiest local supporters at his sprawling ranch-style home, built on the site where his family has lived since 1638.

In between courses, the guests, many of whom had voted for Mr. Chirac in the past for his promise to lower federal taxes, criticized the French President for corruption -- Mr. Chirac was accused of receiving kickbacks on state public housing contracts while he was mayor of Paris in the early 1990s -- and toasted what they called "a brave new era" in French politics.

"I'm not sure what is going to happen on Sunday," Mr. Demblans said as he raised a glass of Champagne in a toast to Mr. Le Pen. "But as far as we are concerned, this election is a historic victory for France. In a way, Le Pen has already won."

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